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Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke
van die Kaap, Natal en Transvaal

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CONFERENCE CAUSES CONTROVERSY

The statement issued by the recent conference of South African member churches of the World Council of Churches has caused one of the greatest controversies in Afrikaans church circles for many years. The statement is expected to be hotly debated by the Transvaal General Synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk at its meeting next month and by the Cape Synod in October.

The resolutions were discussed at an informal conference of ministers of the Cape Province at Stellenbosch on 16th February. The statement was also set down for discussion by Transvaal ministers at a similar conference in Pretoria on 9th February, but the subject of the conference was changed after it had been decided to call a special meeting of the General Synodical Commission of the Transvaal Synod on 2nd March. Ministers, church councils and church members have been asked, meanwhile, to refrain from public actions and statements and to await the guidance of the Synodical Commission.

Immediately after the conference the deputy moderator of the Transvaal General Synod, the Rev. C. F. B. Naudé, in an article in Dagbreek (a weekly newspaper) referred to the "threat of serious division" within the ranks of the churches which had been represented at the conference. He stated that a great responsibility rested on the leaders of those churches to do or say nothing which might disturb relations between the churches in order to gain some doubtful advantage for their own church. "It is abundantly clear that the findings of the deliberations are going to have far-reaching results for church and state, for relationships between Afrikaans and English-speaking, and for the relationships between whites and non-whites," he said.

The Prime Minister, Dr. the Hon. H. F. Verwoerd, expressed himself cautiously on the resolutions. In his New Year radio message he stated that it was necessary to correct the wrong impression that certain Afrikaans churches had declared their standpoint through recent announcements by individual churchmen. "The churches have in fact not yet spoken," he said. "Through their synods, at which the lay members as well as the clergy will be

represented, the voice of the churches has still to be heard." He added that he could not believe that any world organisation, be it the United Nations or the World Council of Churches, could make any permanent impression on our South African thinking and actions on our decisions on how to act with justice to all here in practical everyday life.

The chief information officer of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development stated that the government, with its policy of development for the Bantu areas, had in mind the very things which the World Council of Churches so highly commended. He claimed that the statement, "like so many others of its kind," was deliberately slanted against the positive work of the government in the Bantu homelands.

Some pro-government newspapers strongly criticised the conference statement, while others showed a more moderate approach. "No matter how beautiful the decisions of the church conference may sound, the consistent application of these principles would lead to the complete collapse and disappearance of Christianity at the southern point of Africa," said Die Transvaler. It argued that some of the decisions revealed considerable ignorance of the domestic situation in the Union.

Another newspaper, Die Burger, said that Afrikaners had entered upon a period of lively internal discussion about race relations. It appealed to all who spoke on this topic to put their point of view with dignity and without trying to inject any personal spite. The political columnist of the same newspaper stated: "We are confronted with an acute crisis of confidence within Nationalist Afrikanerdom, and it will not help to try to hide it." This situation, he said, was a test for the people as well as the leaders. He pointed out that the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, through its extensive missionary work, was "knee-deep" in race relations in a more practical sense than a political party which dealt mainly with white people.

The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, whose delegation attended the conference but dissociated itself from the resolutions, issued a statement complaining that it had been unable to muster enough support to defeat any of the controversial resolutions submitted to the conference. In its statement the church listed its objections against several of the resolutions. The Commission of the General Assembly of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk endorsed the attitude of its delegation and decided to recommend to the assembly that the church should withdraw from the World Council of Churches.

The moderamen (executive committee) of the synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in the Orange Free State decided to appoint a committee to study the findings of the conference. The report will be submitted to the General Synodical Commission, which will then formulate the attitude of the church. This church, like those of Natal and South-West Africa, is not a member of the World Council of Churches and was not represented at the conference.

The delegations of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke of the Cape Province and the Transvaal, who had subscribed to most of the conference resolutions, issued a joint statement to explain their attitude. They stated that the church had a responsibility to test the policies of the state in the light of the Word of God. If complete territorial separation was impossible, then full rights, including political rights, could not be indefinitely withheld from those Bantu living in white areas. This standpoint of the church was well-known and had been repeatedly emphasised since 1950. At the same time the church believed that a policy of separation could be defended from the Christian point of view and was the only realistic solution to the race problem. The delegates stated that the memoranda presented by them were the result of earnest and deep study by responsible leaders of the two churches, but at this stage they must not be taken as official views of the two churches. It rested with the respective synods to adopt, amend or reject the findings of the conference. "Until the synods have expressed their attitude, it is idle for those who condemn them or those who applaud them to attach the official stamp of the church to them," the statement concluded.

The official publications of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke were mildly critical of the resolutions passed by the conference. Die Kerkbode welcomed the improvement in the relations between the various churches which had been brought about by the conference, but pleaded for greater consideration of the distinction between the task of the church and that of the state. "We do not advocate that the church should remain silent when legislation is in conflict with the principles of the Word of God, but from experience we know that what is regarded as a Scriptural principle by one church is not necessarily recognised as such by other churches," the editor stated. "The proclamation of justice in the social and political sphere is the responsibility of the church, but when the church concerns itself with political formulas it is an inadmissible coup d'etat."

The publication of the resolutions caused a storm among lay members of the Afrikaans churches. The correspondence columns of the daily newspapers and the church magazines were flooded with letters attacking the conference statement and the delegates who had supported it. Correspondents also condemned the views expressed in the recently published book "Delayed Action." Several parish councils of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk passed resolutions rejecting the conference resolutions and calling for the withdrawal of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke from the World Council of Churches. The delegates were criticised for subscribing to the statement without first obtaining the approval of the synods, and the W.C.C. for alleged Communist influences, association with the Roman Catholic Church, and humanistic and liberal tendencies. Fears were also expressed that the W.C.C. membership of some of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke might jeopardise their proposed union with the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke of Natal,

the Orange Free State and South-West Africa, which do not belong to the W.C.C. One parish council whose minister had contributed an article to "Delayed Action" did, however, endorse the views expressed in that particular article.

The World Council of Churches subsequently issued a statement replying to the attacks made on it as a result of the conference. The general secretary denied that the W.C.C. was humanistic or Communistic and stated that the council had consistently refused to identify itself with any political ideology or system. He also said that the W.C.C. had no formal or constitutional relationship with the Roman Catholic Church.

Die Voorligter, the monthly magazine of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, advised members of the church not to make overhasty statements until the delegates to the conference had explained their actions to the synods. The editor stated that apparently there was much confusion and uncertainty over the resolutions. The editor of Die Oosterlig, a pro-government newspaper, also warned against the tendency to force Afrikaners to adopt a public attitude. "We do not like it at all," he wrote. "Any parish council decision published in this regard will encourage the formation of a front."

The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Rev. Joost de Blank, stated in the official journal of the diocese of Cape Town that the delegates of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke at the conference could not have been more helpful or more eager to find common ground with the other delegates. Another Anglican delegate, Mr. Alan Paton, told the press that at the close of the conference Dr. De Blank had asked the forgiveness of the Dutch Reformed Churches for any hurts that had been inflicted on them. Mr. Paton said he had been impressed by the deep concern of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke for every living person in South Africa. "As far as human eyes can see, the breach between the Dutch Reformed Churches and the Anglican Church was largely healed," he said.

One of the delegates of the Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Robert Orr, stated in an article in The Presbyterian Leader: "No disrespect is intended to the other delegations if I single out the delegations of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke for special mention. They were truly outstanding . . . These men impressed, not only because of their official positions but also because of the depth, sincerity and positive nature of their thinking on the issues before us. Such is the isolationism of the South African church scene that many of us thought that with a few (a very few) heroic exceptions, the N.G. Kerke generally took what we would call a 'negative view' with regard to race relations. One of the great benefits of this conference was that it showed us how wrong we were."

In view of the controversy, the outcome of next month's meeting of the Transvaal General Synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk is eagerly awaited.

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